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Voluntary Internal

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Germany

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Enterohaemorrhagic E. coli Outbreak

Report Categories:

Sanitary/Phytosanitary/Food Safety

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Report Highlights:

German press is highlighting incidences of enterohaemorrhagic E. coli (EHEC) illness. There have reportedly been more than 400 cases and two fatalities. The source is not yet known.

EHEC Outbreak in Germany , Two Confirmed Death

SUMMARY: Germany reported a rise of the dangerous enterohaemorrhagic E. coli bacteria (EHEC) on May 25 which over 400 registered infections and two confirmed deaths. Additionally, the Robert-Koch Institute confirmed 140 patients with Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome (HUS), a severe disease caused by the bacteria. Cases occurred mainly in northern Germany but suspected infections are also reported in the South and East. Health officials are concerned about the fast spread, the severity of infections and the increase in the illness among adult women. While scrambling to find the source of the disease, health officials advising customers to exercise extra caution in selecting and cleaning the foods they consume. END SUMMARY

On May 22, German media reported about a dramatic increase in Enterohemorrhagic E. coli (EHEC) in Germany with over 400 people being infected. The bacteria can be transmitted from human-to-human and from food and can lead to severe digestive problems. Cases mainly occurred in the North but suspected infections are also reported in the South and East. Most affected states are Schleswig-Holstein (200 infections), Lower Saxony (100 infections), and Hamburg (50 infections). Several patients are reportedly being treated at intensive care units because of hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS), a severe disease caused by the bacteria which is characterized by kidney failure. On May 25, the Robert-Koch Institute confirmed 140 HUS cases, mainly occurring in Hamburg. (Note: Normally in a year there are around 1,000 EHEC infections and some 60 cases of HUS in Germany; EHEC is obliged to reporting. End Note).

While children and the elderly are most at risk of illnesses caused by EHEC and are at greatest risk of developing HUS, German health officials have noted an unusually high number of adult women among the sufferers this year. On May 25, RKI confirmed the death of two women but media reports indicate a third victim. A 83-year-old woman from Lower-Saxony reportedly was the first to die of EHEC due to complications from the bacteria on May 21. Another woman from Schleswig-Holstein above the age of 80 died on May 22 and a 24 year-old woman from Bremen died on May 24.

Cause of Infection Unclear

Although RKI said that there is no indication yet what caused this outbreak, the increase in infections is “scarily high”, said RKI head Prof. Burger. A high infection rate among females has raised the questions about whether the source is in a product marketed more heavily to women. Media reports this week indicated that vegetables may be contaminated with liquid manure and could be one prime cause of infections, while sources like raw milk, cream cheese and beef that more often contain the bacteria seem unlikely to have caused the current epidemic. German agricultural associations are outraged about being blamed for the bacteria outbreak. RKI does not rule out alternative infection sources like contaminated water.

RKI said that new cases are continuing to be reported, and the source of the infections may very well still be active. Health officials and scientists are working hard to isolate what is causing this year’s

outbreaks while advising customers to exercise extra caution in selecting and cleaning the foods they consume. A RKI expert team was sent to Hamburg where the majority of HUS cases were detected. First results from investigations are expected by the end of this week.